

Page Denied

Next 3 Page(s) In Document Denied

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NIO/USSR
16 July 1986Soviet Options Regarding Iranian Victory Over Iraq

The Soviets, like we, are increasingly concerned about the prospects of an Iraqi defeat at the hands of Iran.

Other than reasserting their standing displeasure about the war and blaming Iran, on balance, for its prolongation, we have not seen them doing or planning anything very specific against this contingency.

they expressed willingness to do more to inhibit the flow of arms from Soviet allies to Iran. But this doesn't amount to much.

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Should an Iranian victory start to materialize, Soviet behavior will depend crucially on how events proceed. In the extreme scenarios -- a Shia regime in Baghdad and the Iranians threatening wider offensive action -- the Soviets would have extreme, and risky choices:

They could try to act as the savior of the Arabs, but this could involve the need to threaten and even use armed force on Iran's northern border and possible confrontation with the US later. The US could end up stronger in the Gulf and the Soviets more feared by everybody.

Should the Soviets shift to favoring Iran, the new regional power, they'd leave the Gulf to the US and might not end up with more influence in Iran.

The Soviets could do better if the Iranian victory did not look so farreaching, if it led to Saddam's fall but little more, and to a moderation of Iranian aims (because Khomeini would be appeased, a costly war could be ended, and Iran could then make political hay from its new position in the region). This "middling scenario" might give the Soviets the opportunity to play the role they would most desire: to be a regional peacemaker at little risk. They have some capability to do this:

Relations with both sides.

Ability to put military pressure on the region without acting in a threatening manner.

The US, like the Soviets, would like the Iran-Iraq war to end. But it is far from clear that US interests would profit from the Soviets becoming the peacekeeping superpower in the region, with or without US cooperation.

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